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Self-Knowledge, Tyranny, and the Delphic Oracle in Plato's *Charmides*

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1. The Problem of the *Charmides*

In Plato's *Charmides*¹ Socrates conducts an inquiry with the young Charmides and his guardian and cousin Critias, in order to find the elusive quality, *sôphrosunê*. As T.G. Tuckey says, the word has a variety of meanings, referring to "wisdom, discretion, self-respect, moderation, chastity, temperance, prudence."² Most translators render it as "moderation" or "temperance" or even "self-discipline". A more literal translation of *sôphrosunê* would be "sound-mindedness". For "*sophron*" is the result of a combination of two other Greek words, *sôs* and *phrên*.³⁴ Perhaps the best approach, though, is to leave *sôphrosunê* untranslated, and that is what I shall do.

My focus here is the discussion between Critias and Socrates regarding the message of the oracle at Delphi: "Know yourself". This is the only substantive discussion of the oracle outside the *Apology*, so we should give it careful attention, if we are at all interested in the philosophy of Socrates and those who in any way follow or depart from him. For though *sôphrosunê* may be elusive, the dialogue makes it clear that it is deeply connected, whatever its nature is, to the philosophical outlook of Socrates, tying together his ethical and epistemological stances. The task of understanding *sôphrosunê* is thus doubly important: not only will it give us a supremely insightful glimpse into Socrates and his philosophical activity, it will also yield a glimpse into ourselves, if its elusiveness is indeed rooted in an understanding of human nature that is alien to that of Socrates.

Yet the dialogue presents a perplexing problem. For though it presents a discussion of self-knowledge, and ties this directly to the notion of "knowledge of what one does and does not know", Socrates concludes at the end of the dialogue that this seemingly Socratic idea looks neither possible nor beneficial. Put simply, the strangeness of this Socratic dialogue resides in its inability to explain Socrates himself. Now there are basically two responses one can have if one takes this problem of the dialogue seriously: either one accepts Socrates' rejection of Socratic knowledge of ignorance and accepts the consequences of such a rejection, or one dismisses this rejection by explaining that the Socratic ideal of knowledge of ignorance is not in fact refuted in the dialogue. Those who follow the former path make a reasonable argument for distinguishing between the views of Socrates and Plato, and assert that Plato is using the dialogue to show the limitations of Socratic method, limitations that must be overcome by Platonic insights.⁵ Interestingly enough, those who are keen enough to draw this sharp distinction between Socrates and Plato do not draw a sharp enough distinction between Socrates and *Critias*, the interlocutor in whose mouth Plato first places the words "self-knowledge". But it is this distinction that is crucial to a proper response to the problem of the *Charmides*.

In examining Critias' speech carefully, we will see that the dialogue brings into focus *two* distinct images of the nature of *sôphrosunê*. There are two views, call them the Critian and the Socratic, which are in tension with, and even diametrically opposed to, one another. Critias and Charmides turned out to be members of the thirty tyrants of Athens, and at the heart of the conflict between the Socratic and Critian views is a battle between the tyrant and the philosopher, and their corresponding tyrannical and philosophical visions of the limits and possibilities of human beings.⁶ In the *Charmides*, Plato is presenting to us an engagement between Socrates and a kind of anti-Socrates, and is asking us to choose whose life is best. When one thus sees the distinction between the Socratic and Critian viewpoints, it becomes evident that the Critian view is shown to be incoherent while the Socratic ideal of knowledge

¹ I have used the translation, with my own revisions, of W.R.M. Lamb.

² Tuckey, p. 9.

³ See *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell and Scott, rev. Jones, 9th edition, Oxford 1940). Also see *Protagoras* 332b, where Socrates says that the opposite of acting *sophron* is acting *aphronôs*. This can be rendered "foolishly", but of course its literal meaning is "unminded". Not to be *sophron* is, in a sense, to be out of one's mind.

⁴ Thus T.G. and G. S. West, *Plato's Charmides* (Hackett, 1986).

⁵ Cf. the interpretations of Tuckey, Hyland, Kahn, McKim, Stalley.

⁶ Critias and Charmides both turned out to be members of the "Thirty Tyrants" who overthrew the democracy. Critias' companionship with Socrates is also one of the factors leading to the claim that Socrates was the teacher of tyrants. The discussion of the *Charmides* thus takes place with these issues very present in the background. As I make clear, I believe the dialogue is a defense, rather than a critique, of Socrates.

of ignorance escapes refutation, but remains an ideal to be explored. Plato, rather than critiquing the limitations of Socrates' method, seems to be critiquing the flawed understanding of Socrates' companions.

2. *Sôphrosunê* as Critian Self-Knowledge

At the middle of the dialogue Critias makes the remarkable claim that *sôphrosunê* is identical to self-knowledge. He does this in a long speech that calls up the Oracle at Delphi as his authoritative witness:

For I would almost assert this to be *sôphrosunê*: knowing or recognizing oneself (*to gignoskein heauton*); and I go along with the one who put up a prescription of this sort in Delphi. For it seems to me that this inscription was put up as if it were a greeting (*prosrêsis*) from the god to those coming in instead of "hail" (*chaire*), as if "hail" were not correct, and they must not exhort (*parakeleuesthai*) one other to say this, but to say "be *sophron*". Thus the god addresses (*prosagoreuei*) the ones coming into the temple differently than do human beings. Such was the thinking of the one who put up the inscription, it seems to me, and he asserts that the god always says to those coming in nothing but "be *sophron*". But he says it in a quite riddling way (*ainigmatôdesteron*), like a prophet (*mantis*). For "know yourself" (*gnôthi sauton*) and "be *sophron*" are the same, as the inscription and I assert. But perhaps someone might consider (*oiêtheiê*) them to be different, which happened, it seems to me, to the ones laying down the later prescriptions, "Nothing too much" (*mêden agan*) and "A pledge, and ruin is near" (*to enguê para d' atê*). For they supposed "know yourself" to be advice or counsel (*sumboulên*), not a greeting from the god to those coming in. And so, in order that they might put up (*anatheien*) counsels no less useful (*chrêsîmous*), they wrote these and put them up.⁷

This is a complex and difficult speech. But it will be seen that perhaps the biggest mistake in interpreting this speech has been attributing its content to Plato or Socrates.⁸ The view Critias is putting forward here cannot be Socrates' (or Plato's) opinion, but is rather a twisted perversion of it.

Critias begins by agreeing with the authoritative Oracle, and begins to describe the intention of the person who put up the inscription. His first comment about the Delphic inscription is that "Be *sophron*" is a greeting (*prosrêsis*), and a more correct greeting than "Hail!" or "Rejoice!" (*chaire*). The god thus greets humans coming into the temple in a different way than human beings greet each other, and Critias asserts that the god is really exhorting (*parakeleuesthai*) human beings to greet each other similarly.

This is strange. First of all, at a basic level, what does it mean to say that "Be *sophron*" is a kind of greeting? Second, why is Critias talking about this particular "greeting" from the Delphic oracle? For, the Delphic oracle does not mention *sôphrosunê*, but only self-knowledge. As Critias continues, his speech takes up the latter question first, and later the first question becomes his theme.

First, Critias claims that the inscription makes the connection between *sôphrosunê* and self-knowledge in a riddling (*ainigmatôdesteron*) manner, because it is done, after all, by a prophet (*mantis*). This is his answer to the latter question: the inscription does not say "Be *sophron*", but "*gnôthi sauton*", because these are the same and because it is written by a riddler. As Critias continues explaining the "riddling" manner of the oracle, the traditional link between self-knowledge and *sôphrosunê* comes more into focus. For he mentions the two other inscriptions that were put up in Delphi: "Nothing too much" (*mêden agan*) and "A pledge, and ruin is near" (*to enguê para d' atê*).⁹ The appearance of these inscriptions alongside "know yourself" emphasizes the traditional meaning that the Oracular inscription had. For the latter two remind human beings to recognize their limits: their inability to understand, predict, or rule all that is around them. Both emphasize the importance of knowing one's place, and not transcending it. "Know yourself" thus carries with it a corresponding meaning.

However, Critias now reveals that he is ready and willing to kick away the ground on which the traditional link between *sôphrosunê* and self-knowledge appeared to be standing, and assert his own *correct* understanding of the true Delphic inscription. In this way he begins to answer our first question: what does it mean to say that "Be *sophron*" is a kind of greeting?

⁷ 164d-165a.

⁸ Hyland (pp. 88-93) is especially guilty of this. But, as Schmid (p. 179, n.32) points out, Friedlander, Guthrie, and North also come close to the same error in their readings of the passage.

⁹ 165a.

Critias asserts that the latter dedicators misinterpreted “know yourself” as advice or counsel (*sumboulên*), rather than as a greeting. They consequently erroneously decided to put up advice that was no less “useful (*chrêsimous*)”. This is the sum of Critias’ response to our question, and though it is brief it does provide some illumination, if one considers the contrast between what is advice or counsel and what is a greeting. Consider this description by David Levine:

“Counsel” is above all prescriptive, value laden, advice. As such it proposes, in the case of deficiency, a change in one’s own or another’s doing or thinking, in oneself and in one’s way of life.¹⁰

Seen in this light, it is clear that a greeting is unlike counsel in all these ways. It is not value laden or prescriptive; its goal is not change in the other. Advice such as “nothing too much” holds one to a higher standard, but with regards to a greeting this is just not so. A greeting such as “Hail! (*Chaire*)” seems to be value free, and imposes no view of what is good and bad on the other. Thus self-knowledge or *sôphrosunê* are now only tenuously connected to, if not wholly separated from, knowledge of the good. In addition to this, the content of a greeting seems to be a matter of pure convention. Whether one says “Hail” or “Cheers” or “*Ciao*” is a phenomenon that seems to carry no significant content, philosophically speaking, and is dependent on the customs in one’s community, customs that are human, all too human. It is here that we further see Critias’ radical view come to light. For his words ultimately bring the god down to a human level: he is vitiating the notion that the “superior” god may be giving “mere humans” advice, and is asserting that the gods are really participating in a value free practice that humans engage in with one another.¹¹

At the same time, however, Critias is asserting that few human beings have actually understood this correctly, and that he himself is one of those who sees into the mysteries, who is really at the level of the so-called “god”. True self-knowledge and *sôphrosunê* are thus only in the domain of the elite: it seems only the superior can be truly sound in mind. So at the same time that Critias has brought the god down from the divine, he has elevated himself and others like him to the super-human. In sum, Critias’ description of the greeting “know yourself” thus seems to be tied up with three beliefs:

- 1) *sôphrosunê* is somehow “value free”
- 2) *sôphrosunê* belongs only to the superior, “godlike” human beings
- 3) these superior, “godlike” human beings have replaced the gods.¹²

The picture yielded by these beliefs gives us Critias’ doctrine of narcissistic self-benefit. As Schmid sums it up, Critias’ views are the “amoral human praise of self-certainty, not the divine moral counsel of self-restraint”. Levine suggests that “‘Know Thyself’ becomes ‘be thyself,’ ‘do your own affairs’ without restriction. It is the lion’s way: do what you want...without regard to bad or good other than one’s own advantage...”¹³

It is thus surprising that this passage has not aroused more suspicion. Commentators have identified, or come close to identifying, the speech Critias makes here with Plato’s own opinion.¹⁴ Rather, Critias’ presentation, at the very least, forces the reader instead to *ask* the question: Is his view of the Delphic oracle, and thereby of self-knowledge, really identical to Socrates’ own view? And my argument implies that the answer to this question must be a resounding *no*. Critias defines the good by what *he is and does*. At 163c Critias says that all harmful things are

¹⁰ Levine, p. 175.

¹¹ This has been hinted at since the beginning of Critias’ speech, with his emphasis on the “dedicator” who “put up” the inscriptions. The human source of the inscription is highlighted, while the intention of the god is only mentioned secondarily. Schmid (p. 179 n.35) points out that Critias says the inscription was put up “as if” it were from the god, and (p.180 n.36) that he repeatedly calls his account “his opinion (*dokei moi*).” This not only emphasizes the human element of the speech, but stresses Critias’ vision of himself as a knower. (Cf. 165a, where Critias pairs the dedicator with himself. See Levine, p. 312 n. 25.) Of course, as Schmid points out, calling it an opinion signals its “low epistemic status” even if Critias is thereby trying to shield himself from refutation.

¹² See Schmid 37-39; Levine 175-7.

¹³ Schmid, p. 38; Levine, p. 176.

¹⁴ The cause for this seems to be a projection of a “Socratic” interpretation of “know thyself” into the anti-Socratic speech. For instance, Hyland makes the striking claim that Critias’ characterization of “know yourself” as a greeting is “a well-chosen image for the kind of responsive openness to things which... [is] the interrogative stance of philosophy” (p. 90). Levine, in his review of Hyland’s book, responds rightly: “Critias is anything but open...the conclusion of this part of the discussion is Critias’ exposure of his own deep-seated incapacity for such openness at 169c-d...(Levine (2), p. 69).”

the affairs of others (*ta blabera panta allotria*)¹⁵, while the beneficial things are one's own. He is not saying that the "good" is his guiding principle, and that what is one's own is defined in reference to this ideal. Precisely the reverse is true: it is one's own benefit, even though this is not clearly defined, that is the standard for good and bad. Drew Hyland compares Critias' position to that of Thrasymachus: "One is *sophron* who does only that which is useful to oneself; anything that is harmful is someone else's business, and so *sôphrosunê* as doing one's own business is to be understood as doing only what is useful to oneself."¹⁶

But earlier in the dialogue Socrates showed that Critias' definition, "the doing of good things", failed as well insofar as it seemed that the *sophron* individual could do good things without self-knowledge. Socrates thus implied that Critias himself may not in fact know what is really good for him. Perhaps Kant would describe the impasse this way: "doing one's own things without knowing the good is *empty*, while doing the good without knowing one's own things is *blind*."¹⁷

The suggestion Socrates seems to be making throughout is that knowledge of the self, qua human being, is somehow inseparable from knowledge of the good. But how is self-knowledge related to knowledge of the good? This is the question raised for those listening in on this conversation, while Critias either misses or refuses to see it. Socrates thus attempts to get clearer on the matter and in doing so he shows that Critias' views of self-knowledge and the good continue to be problematic, and it is *these* views that turn out to be incoherent by the end of the dialogue.

For as Socrates examines him, Critias goes on to say that *sôphrosunê* "alone is an *epistêmê* of all the others and of itself."¹⁸ If we consider carefully what is implied in this statement, then we will see that it too rests on Critias' doctrine of self-benefit that has previously appeared.

To possess an *epistêmê* which has all others and itself as its object, is to have a knowledge that is both all-inclusive and reflexive. It has generality and self-reference. If possible, the person who actually possessed this would seem to know all there is to know. *Sôphrosunê*, as defined by Critias, seems to be a divine wisdom. It is the *ruling science* that coordinates all others to serve its proper ends. This view combines the doctrine of self-interest with an all powerful knowledge. But far from coming out of nowhere, this is the logical outcome – the ultimate culmination – of the views that Critias has expressed so far.¹⁹ The truth of this claim becomes more apparent when Socrates and Critias go on to construct a city in which the ruler possessing *sôphrosunê* has knowledge of all things past, present, and future.²⁰ I believe this super-human capacity is the main element of Critias' vision of "human" excellence. His views of self-knowledge and the good are tied to his desire to break his human bonds and be a god. In contrast, we need only think of Socrates' praise of knowledge of ignorance in the *Apology* to begin to see that the Critian view is anti-Socratic, and now we are compelled to give a fuller explanation of this Socratic alternative.

3. Conclusion

But in conclusion, the ideal Critias displays thus seems not only to be incompatible with a Socratic understanding of *sôphrosunê* (if that might be defined as knowledge of ignorance or limits), but it is also fundamentally misguided about human nature and, ultimately, the best human life. The Critian standpoint transcends our human limits and in so doing leads to an incoherent mess; if the Socratic view escapes refutation, it must start from a proper understanding of human beings that recognizes these limits and responds to them appropriately. I

¹⁵ 163c.

¹⁶ Hyland, p. 83. Cf. Schmid (p.34): "Critias' underlying thought is clear: the true meaning of *sôphrosunê* does not consist in making or even doing what is beautiful; it rather focuses on the idea of procuring benefit for oneself and avoiding all harm as "alien"...Critias identifies the good with what benefits himself, in the sense of a calculating, narrow egoism."

¹⁷ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 76.

¹⁸ 166c. We should be wondering by now whether this doctrine too has its source in Socrates, and whether Critias' understanding of it twists the original. Cf. Levine, p. 194 and Schmid, p. 50.

¹⁹ Cf. Schmid, 48. Accordingly, the interpretations of both Stalley and Tuozzo may need to be tweaked. Stalley claims an *epistêmê* of knowledge in general is needed because it *just is* general (Cf. *Ion* 531a-533c) and because of the phenomenon of examining others (p. 271). Tuozzo's explanation for why *sôphrosunê* knows itself and the other knowledge is that if we want to know if the other knowledges are beneficial, we need the one that is the standard for benefit (p. 305). Both these claims may be right, but neither explains why it is the Critian conception of a ruling science and not the Socratic conception of knowledge of ignorance which addresses these problems. That is, *sôphrosunê* will turn out to be vitally connected with the knowledge of limits in a way that Critias' definition, but not Socrates', fails to be. It is this vital Socratic connection that is the answer that Tuozzo and Stalley call for, or so I hope to argue.

²⁰ See 173b-174a.

believe this is what is involved in the Socratic conception of “knowledge of ignorance.” But in the *Charmides* it remains somewhat unclear how to spell out the nature of this conception: How is knowledge of ignorance possible and how is it gained? And if we can spell out the nature of Socrates’ conception of knowledge of ignorance, how do we relate it to Critias’ conception? As has become clear, these two images could not be compatible with one another. Yet Critias hinted that he has generated his view from what he takes to be Socrates’ own teaching. If the Critian conception is a twisted perversion of the Socratic one, how do we properly understand their deep connection? But in presenting this drama Plato has made those with a philosophical nature more aware of the illusions and self-ignorance of the tyrant, lest we ever lose our way. The task or *pragma* of understanding the authentic self-knowledge of the philosopher remains a question for Plato in the *Charmides* and the later Platonic dialogues, and may even require venturing into philosophical territory unexplored by Socrates himself.

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